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Not Too Much to Ask

When the Central Intelligence Agency was established, in the late 1940s the explanation was that we needed a specially trained and equipped organization to gather information on political, economic, and military situations all over the world. We needed an organization that could give the President reports on these situations every day. The CIA was to be a well-camouflaged if not a secret agency — so that it could go about its data-gathering assignment with a minimum of trouble.

The CIA has, indeed, gathered information and prepared the confidential evaluations for the presidents. Some of these evaluations, like those that forecast the problems in Vietnam, turned out to be good and prescient judgments, even if they were ignored. The CIA would look a lot better today if it had stayed with information gathering — instead of getting into the business of designing and executing adventures like the Bay of Pigs.

It has been rumored for a long time and now is finally confirmed that the CIA has been running the "secret war" in Laos. This is the operation in which an irregular army of more than 30,000 Meo tribesmen, Thai volunteers, and men from the Royal Laotian forces has been waging nine years of relatively unavailing war for the Plain of Jars and the hamlets of the eastern half of the country. Our attempt to keep the operation secret has made our motives look too much like the motives of the Communists.

To the extent that the United States must carry on military programs in South Asia — and elsewhere — it would seem more reasonable and satisfactory to have them carried on openly and by the Department of Defense. We may not accomplish what we set out to do in every case. But at least we'll know what the United States is doing. That isn't too much to ask of the government.